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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9183
INFO RUEHJK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2018

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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH MERETZ PARTY
CHAIRMAN ORON

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) The Ambassador called on Meretz Party Chairman Chaim Oron November 10. Oron, who was well-informed on the status of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, said he it is likely that Likud Party leader Bibi Netanyahu will focus his election campaign on the economy, which is seen by many Israelis as Netanyahu's strong suit, while down-playing potential differences with the U.S. over Netanyahu's approach to the Palestinians. Oron predicted that the February 10 elections will lead to the formation of a National Unity Government including Likud, Kadima and Labor, no matter whether Livni or Netanyahu "win." Oron said he agreed with Shimon Peres' view that the Arab Initiative must serve as a central element of the framework for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

¶2. (C) Oron said he was concerned about Palestinian succession issues. His view is that imprisoned Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti is the only likely successor to Mahmoud Abbas. (Note: Barghouti is serving a life term for multiple counts of ordering terrorist attacks that killed Israelis, but he could be released as part of a prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit, or as the result of a decision by the security cabinet and approved by the President.) Barghouti, he said, is well briefed on the peace process and is in regular contact with the PA and other Palestinian figures. His influence is such the PM Fayyad visited him to seek Barghouti's blessing before agreeing to take the PM job. Oron predicted that Barghouti will support a peace agreement if one is reached. The Ambassador asked Oron, who has regular contact with Barghouti in prison, whether Barghouti is bitter. Oron replied to the contrary, Barghouti is making the most of his prison experience, reading extensively, consulting with Palestinian leaders, including Abu Mazen and Salam Fayyad, and benefiting from the boost to his street credibility that comes with serving hard time in Israeli detention.

¶3. (C) Oron expressed concern that if Netanyahu heads the next Israeli government, he is likely to implement his ideas about pursuing "economic peace" with the Palestinians while downplaying political negotiations. Oron said this won't work, there will be no economic peace without a political process. He asserted this approach is likely to lead to a third Intifada due to the dashing of Palestinian political expectations. A third uprising in his view would break out spontaneously as a result of an incident or miscalculation, rather than be planned by the PA leadership.

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